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CELEBRATING AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

American Legacy

Winter 1999 • Volume 4 / Number 4

The Fastest Man
in the World

Virtual Harlem
1927: A High-
Tech Visit

Fighting
Spirit
The Church
in Action



THROUGHOUT ITS HISTORY THE BLACK CHURCH IN AMERICA has represented spiritual resilience, supporting faith and endurance through centuries of trial. But beyond fulfilling the religious needs of a people, the church has also served as what one historian calls a "political system," a training ground for social change. While saving souls, black ministers have had to lead their congregants through a hostile and often cruel earthly world. Almost by default they've found themselves at the forefront of black America's long struggle for racial justice.

Martin Luther King, Jr., is the most famous black preacher who took on the fight for civil rights from the pulpit, but of course he had many predecessors. In April 1787 Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, two former

THE WORK OF THE PREACHERS

THE MINISTERS WHO HEADED BLACK AMERICA'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM IN THE 1960s DREW ON A LONG TRADITION OF CHURCH-BRED ACTIVISM, AND LIKE THEIR MANY PREDECESSORS, THEY FOUND THE WEAPONS THEY NEEDED IN SCRIPTURE

BY DALE EDWYNA SMITH

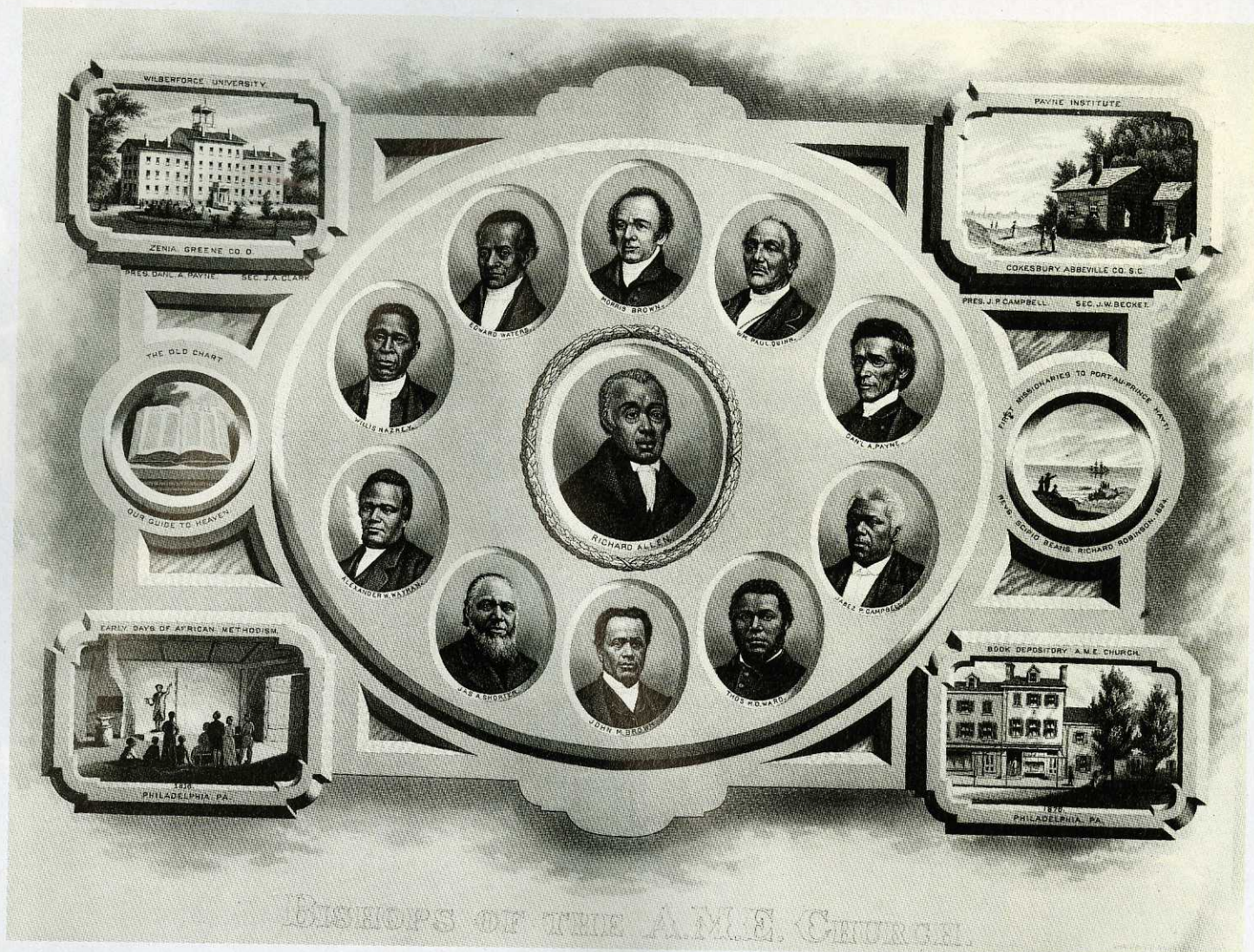
slaves who attended St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, founded the Free African Society, one of the country's first social and economic welfare organizations for blacks. Seven months later, after they were forcibly removed from the sanctuary of the church for praying in a "whites only" section, they led the other black members out of St. George's to form a separate congregation where they could worship in dignity. "We all went out of the church in a body," Allen remembered, "and they were no more plagued with us in the church." Allen eventually went on to found the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church, the first independent black denomination; Jones became the country's first black Episcopal priest.

Allen and Jones, both evangelists, worked to spread Christianity as broadly as possible among African-Americans, but the institution of slavery impeded them. From the earliest days, slave owners feared that a true understanding of the Bible would plant revolutionary ideas of spiritual equality in the minds of their captives. The result was their deliberate invention of a theology in which the Bible and thus God Himself not only tolerated slavery but supported it. For the plan to work, it was essential that slaves not be allowed to learn to read.

A Virginia slave named Nat Turner understood the Bible in a different light; he saw that its message was one of justice. Turner could read, having been considered a "favored" slave. As a young man he preached to other slaves on the plantation, and he may even

**MARTIN LUTHER
KING, JR. (LEFT),
RALPH ABERNATHY
(CENTER), AND A
SUPPORTER KNEEL
IN PRAYER.**





**RICHARD ALLEN,
FOUNDER OF
THE AFRICAN
METHODIST
EPISCOPAL CHURCH,
IS SURROUNDED
BY SUCCEEDING
BISHOPS IN AN
1880s BROADSIDE.**

SLAVE OWNERS FEARED THAT A TRUE UNDERSTANDING OF THE BIBLE WOULD PLANT REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS IN THE MINDS OF THEIR CAPTIVES.

have converted a few whites.

The physical setting for Nat Turner's epiphany is striking because it was so ordinary and so typical of slave life. One day, while he labored in the fields, a vision came to him. He told Thomas Gray, a white lawyer down on his luck, whose transcription has provided historians with the only face-to-face "interview" of Turner, that he had seen "white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle—and the sun darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in the streams." A few days later Turner noticed "drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven," a sign that, along with the appearance of a solar eclipse, he interpreted as God's express message to him. He subsequently heard a voice say that "the Serpent is loosened and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of

men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first." The vision convinced Turner that the moment had come for action, and he began to preach of Jesus as a liberator. After he organized a slave uprising remembered for its bloodshed, in October 1831, he was apprehended and hanged.

Tales of Nat Turner's exploits became legend in African-American communities across the South, and more and more enslaved blacks followed his example in seeking solace and courage from biblical stories of freedom and redemption. The book of Exodus inspired many to try to escape to the North or to Canada; ministers and abolitionists in the North routinely compared the plight of blacks to that of the Hebrews fleeing enslavement and persecution in



**BLACK MINISTERS
WHO BLENDED
RELIGION AND
POLITICS: ABSALOM
JONES (TOP), HENRY
MCNEAL TURNER
(RIGHT), AND
VERNON JOHNS
(ABOVE).**



ancient Egypt; and Harriet Tubman, one of the Underground Railroad's most successful conductors, came to be known as the "Moses" of her people.

After the Civil War, black denominations began to flourish, and a new generation of preachers emerged. One of the most outspoken was Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, a founder of the A.M.E. church in Georgia. Joining Christian zeal to political purpose, Turner served in the Georgia legislature during Reconstruction and organized various church-based charities to assist the freedmen. In 1868 he led thirty-two other black elected officials out of the assembly chamber when it became clear that most of their white colleagues were intent on disenfranchising blacks. From the pulpit he preached racial pride, arguing that God Himself was black.

Turner also called on blacks to move to Africa, both to secure their rights and to help uplift their ancestral homeland by spreading the Gospel. During the Spanish-American War, he stated that blacks should never volunteer to fight for a country that had treated them so shabbily. Even several years after the war, he was still angry enough to remark that he "used to love the Grand Old Flag . . . but to the Negro . . . the American flag is a dirty and contemptible rag." But Turner's was a voice crying in the wilderness—the vast majority of African-Americans could not afford to pull up stakes and sail for Africa. Though his increasing militancy over the years had alienated him from the A.M.E. church

hierarchy, nearly 25,000 blacks attended his funeral service in Atlanta in 1915, paying their final respects to a man who had worked tirelessly to boost their own racial pride.

During much of the nineteenth century, attaining freedom for blacks in the here and now was a primary goal of the black church. After the Civil War the focus was on securing civil rights. The black community was changing as it began to move from the rural South to cities, especially in the North, and black women, whose roles had previously been restricted to domestic work, began to have a voice in church affairs. The historian Jacquelin Grant notes that traditionally women had been the "backbone" of the church, by which black men of the church meant "background." Now some women tried to break that mold, among them Nannie Helen Burroughs, who combined work in the women's club movement with a voice in Baptist church business. She created a powerful woman's auxiliary, which around the turn of the century had more than one million African-American members. She would have made a very good minister, but the Baptist Church of her time didn't ordain women.

In the 1920s the great migration of blacks to Northern industrial cities fueled further growth in the black church. Northern Baptist and Methodist congregations saw their numbers swell along with their responsibilities for helping rural Southern blacks adjust to the big city. They fed the hungry, found jobs and housing for new arrivals, and tried to connect newcomers with relatives.

Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who inherited the pulpit of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church from his father in 1937, came to symbolize the strength of the black church in the cities. In his very first sermon he borrowed a slogan from a billboard—"I'd walk a mile for a Camel"—and asked his congregation of gamblers, bootleggers, and chorus girls how far they would walk for Jesus.

In 1930 Powell organized demonstrations against Harlem Hospital, which had refused to permit black doctors to practice there. The success of that campaign, resulting in an interracial staff and a rejuvenation of training programs for black nurses and doctors, inspired Powell to expand his boycotts to white-owned Harlem businesses that refused to hire blacks. "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" marches carried him from the church into politics. Thus, in 1941 he became the first black on the New York City Council, and in 1944 he was elected to the U.S. Congress.

There can be no greater example of the black church ministering to both spiritual and social needs than the role it played during the civil rights move-



DURING THE EARLY DAYS OF THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT, MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., WAS A MAN OF LOVE BUT WHO WOULD SURELY "BREAK THE BACKBONE" OF ANY NATION THAT DID NOT FOLLOW HIS LEAD.

NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS, FAR LEFT, URGED WOMEN TO BECOME LEADERS IN THE BAPTIST CHURCH.

ment of the 1950s and '60s. Martin Luther King, Jr., was particularly adept at articulating the philosophy of nonviolent protest to a people grounded, as one historian puts it, in "folk religion and revival technique." King had not always intended to enter the ministry. He was, first and foremost, a true intellectual (it is said that he loved having books around him even before he could read), and during his years as an undergraduate at Morehouse College he thought that education might be a more useful tool for overturning injustice; the emotional displays of religious Southern blacks embarrassed him, and he didn't consider the black church "intellectually respectable." Ultimately, of course, he decided the min-

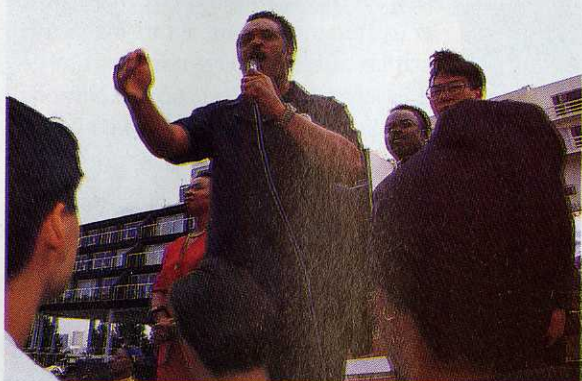
istry was better suited to his goal of serving humanity than the study of medicine or the law would be.

After completing doctoral studies at Brown University, in Rhode Island, King accepted the pastorate of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. His controversial predecessor there, the Reverend Vernon Johns, had drawn a firestorm of criticism from both blacks and whites for speaking out against an elitist African-American ministry as well as Jim Crow.

The grandson of a slave, Johns began life as a farm boy, but his intellectual abilities, which included a command of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, earned him a degree from Oberlin Seminary in 1918. His



LEFT: THE REVEREND ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR., LEADS STRIKING HOSPITAL WORKERS IN 1959. BOTTOM LEFT: JESSE JACKSON SPEAKS OUT FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN 1995.



activism, and in 1952 the church deacons forced his resignation.

In 1960 Martin Luther King, Jr., having heard of Johns's energetic attacks on social ills, began to search for the aging minister so he could borrow his old sermon notes. Johns had continued to preach, and he died in 1964, shortly after King located him.

The replacement in 1954 of Johns with King, a soft-spoken academic with Southern roots and three years of Northern education, was meant to restore the status quo. In keeping with his new position, King was asked in 1955 to head the Montgomery Improvement Association—in part because he was new in town and hadn't yet alienated anyone important, but also because local blacks felt that he could communicate as an equal with whites. The Montgomery Improvement Association, a coalition of ministers and community leaders, had been formed during the massive boycotts sparked by Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in 1955. In King's first speech during the boycott, he linked the fledgling civil rights movement to the long tradition of black Christian activism.

When he preached that God was not only a God of love, but one who would surely "break the backbone" of any nation that did not follow His commandments, he outraged Southern whites. Facing death threats, he prayed for guidance and then said that he had received God's reassurance that he was on the right track and must "stand up for justice."

King's speeches during the early days of the boycott merely hinted at what was to come. His spiritual and political leadership and that of other black clergy would inspire ordinary men, women, and children not only to continue the 1955 bus boycott (when individuals formed car pools or walked for miles in the rain rather than accept Jim Crow), but also to risk violence and death in countless other civil rights campaigns over the following decade.

Though religiously inspired reform movements in the black community have sprung mainly from the black church, non-religious leaders have also made theology a component of their philosophy. In the 1920s the activist Marcus Garvey based his plans for sending black Americans to Africa on Old Testament references to "princes" coming "out of Egypt." Like Henry McNeal Turner, he preached that God was black and that people of African descent should take pride in their color. His message attracted millions of blacks, and at one time his Universal Negro Improvement Association had chapters across the country. Elijah Muhammad, who founded the Nation of Islam in the 1930s, similarly preached that God was black, using examples and language from the Old

**JR., PREACHED OF A GOD NOT ONLY
D NOT FOLLOW HIS COMMANDMENTS.**

theology professors promoted what was called the Social Gospel, espousing the use of Scripture for guidance in actively combatting the various evils facing human society. In Montgomery, Johns, a master orator, tried to shake up entrenched patterns of segregation with sermons on race and class. He criticized not only the white power structure but his own bourgeois parishioners who, for example, looked down on Negro spirituals as heathen music. Johns's sermons chastising his congregation about class divisions among blacks, and his support for public school desegregation in the South, were the straws that broke the camel's back. His sedate congregation at Dexter Avenue Baptist wasn't ready for

THE WORK OF BLACK HOLY MEN IN AMERICA SHOWS A COMMONALITY OF PURPOSE. THE PREACHERS' RELIGIOUS OUTLOOKS HAVE OFTEN OVERLAPPED INTO DAILY LIFE.

Testament that would have been familiar to his followers.

One of those attracted to Muhammad's message was a man who in his early life had been exposed to the teachings of Garvey through his parents. The Nation of Islam gave Malcolm X, as it did so many others, an opportunity to develop spiritually by offering a theology infused with black nationalism. Malcolm said that he was attracted to the Nation because its ministers did not preach to him but rather gave him his history. And Malcolm followed that example after he became a minister, emphasizing not theology but history. His admirers remembered how he would hold an audience enraptured with his carefully constructed parables about black life in America. The mainstream press interpreted his preaching as "anti-Christian," and in the early 1960s his critics made a point of drawing moral distinctions between Malcolm and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Both King and Malcolm X were changed by their

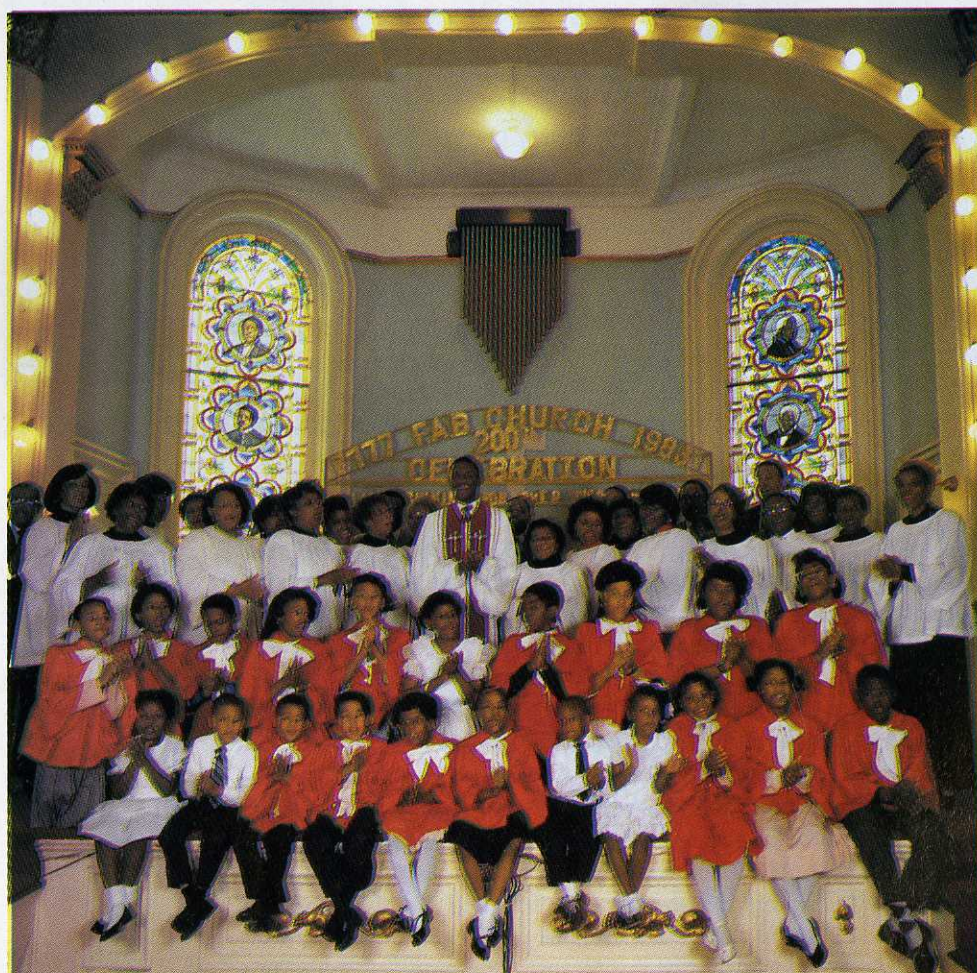
contact with religious ideas outside of America. For Malcolm the inspiration arose from Mecca; for King, from India. Both men would come to urge African-Americans to gain a world perspective and identify with oppressed people everywhere. King said, "What affects one directly, affects all indirectly. . . . I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be." Shortly before his death Malcolm X planned to bring the plight of African-Americans to world attention by addressing the United Nations. For him, the struggle was more than a domestic issue. "It's not a question of civil rights," he often said, "but a question of human rights."

The work of black holy men in America shows a commonality of purpose. Almost always, the preachers' religious outlooks have overlapped into daily life—from Nat Turner's visions for overturning slavery to Martin Luther King's head-on confrontation with American racism. In the late 1960s, when the term "black power" came into vogue, white clergymen criticized black clergymen for not denouncing it. In July 1966 the National Committee of Negro Clergymen (which would soon change its name to the National Committee of Black Churchmen) responded by taking out a full-page ad in *The New York Times*: "The fundamental distortion . . . in the controversy about 'Black Power' is rooted in a gross imbalance of power and conscience between Negro and white Americans. . . . White people are justified in getting what they want through the use of power, but . . . Negroes must make their appeal only through conscience. . . . We regard as sheer hypocrisy or as a blind and dangerous illusion the view that opposes love to power. . . ."

With this, America's black preachers told America they would continue to fight for freedom—just as they always had done. ★

Dale Edwynna Smith, formerly an assistant professor of American history at Washington University in St. Louis, writes frequently on issues relating to the African-American experience.

THE PASTOR AND CHOIR OF SAVANNAH'S FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH CELEBRATE TWO CENTURIES OF FAITH AND WORKS.



To His Excellency The President

HUNDREDS OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS WROTE
TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN DURING THE CIVIL WAR
ASKING FOR HELP OR OFFERING ADVICE

EDITED BY HAROLD HOLZER

"NEARLY EVERY LETTER WRITTEN TO PRESIDENT Lincoln during the Civil War by an African-American was routinely . . . [forwarded] to the War Department's Bureau of Colored Troops," writes Harold Holzer. "They had been received at the White House, reviewed by secretaries, and sent on through the bureaucracy—formidable even then—where they were sometimes answered by functionaries. . . ." The President is not known to have personally answered any.

While gathering material for his latest book, *The Lincoln Mailbag*, Holzer, a renowned Lincoln scholar, turned up previously unpublished examples of this poignant and powerful correspondence. A selection, with his comments, appears below.



Black Doctor Wants to Serve

Toronto Canada West Jan 7/63
President Abraham Lincoln

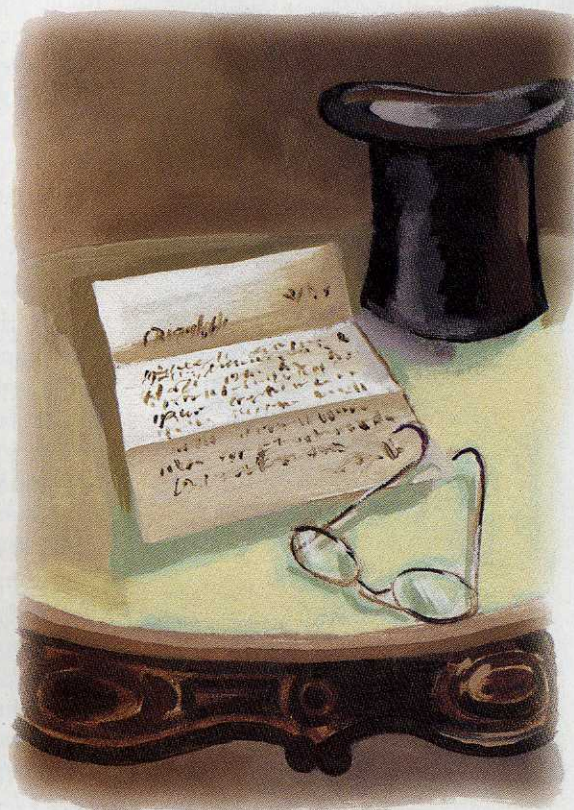
Sir,
Having seen that it is intended to garrison the U.S. forts &c with colored troops,

I beg leave to apply to you for an appointment as surgeon to some of the coloured regiments, or as physician to some of the depots of "freedmen." I was compelled to leave my native country, and come to this on account of prejudice against colour, for the purpose of obtaining a knowledge of my profession; and having accomplished that object, at one of the principle educational institutions of this Province, I am now prepared to practice it, and would like to be in a position where I can be of use to my race,

If you will take the matter into favorable consideration, I can give satisfactory reference as to character and qualification from some of the most distinguished members of the profession in this city where I have been in practice for about six years. I Remain Sir

Yours Very Respectfully
A. T. Augusta
Bachelor of Medicine
Trinity College Toronto

The letter was forwarded to the Army Medical Board, which ruled in March that Alexander T. Augusta could not



serve in the American military because he was a British subject and "a person of African descent." But Augusta would not give up. He journeyed to Washington and appealed the decision. The board reversed itself, and Augusta went on to serve as a military surgeon in the Seventh U.S. Colored Troops.



Hero's Mother Worries Over Treatment of Black War Prisoners

Buffalo [New York] July 31 1863

Excellent Sir
My good friend says I must write to you and she will send it My son went

in the 54th regiment. I am a colored woman and my son was strong and able to fight for his country and the colored people have as much to fight for as any. My father was a Slave and escaped from Louisiana before I was born morn forty years ago. I have but poor edication but I never went to schol, but I know just as well as any what is right between



man and man. Now I know it is right that a colored man should go and fight for his country, and so ought to a white man. I know that a colored man ought to run no greater risques than a white, his pay is no greater his obligation to fight is the same. So why should not our enemies be compelled to treat him the same, Made to do it.

My son fought at Fort Wagoner but thank God he was not taken prisoner, as many were I thought of this thing before I let my boy go but then they said Mr. Lincoln will never let them sell our colored soldiers for slaves, if they do he will get them back quck he will rettallyate and stop it. Now Mr Lincoln dont you think you oght to stop this thing and make them do the same by the colored men they have lived in idleness all their lives on stolen labor and made savages of the colored people, but they now are so furious because they are proving themselves to be men, such

as have come away and got some edication. It must not be so. You must put the rebels to work in State prisons to making shoes and things, if they sell our colored soldiers, till they let them all go. And give their wounded the same treatment. it would seem cruel, but their no other way, and a just man must do hard things sometimes, that shew him to be a great man. They tell me some do you will take back the Proclamation, don't do it. When you are dead and in Heaven, in a thousand years that action of yours will make the Angels sing your praises I know it. . . .

Will you see that the colored men fighting now, are fairly treated. You ought to do this, and do it at once, Not let the thing run along meet it quickly and manfully, and stop this, mean cowardly cruelty. We poor oppressed ones, appeal to you, and ask fair play.

Yours for Christs sake
Hannah Johnson

Lincoln did not reply to Hannah Johnson; her letter was forwarded to the War Department's new Bureau of Colored Troops, established on May 22, 1863. Two weeks before she wrote, her son, along with his comrades from the 54th Massachusetts, had led the fateful assault on Battery Wagner, near Charleston, South Carolina, suffering major casualties. Hannah Johnson did not yet know it, but the very day that she wrote this tautly reasoned demand for equal treatment for black prisoners of war, Lincoln issued an order of retaliation, vowing to enslave a Confederate prisoner for every black Union prisoner enslaved by the enemy.



A Slave Wants "To Be Free"

Belair [Maryland] Aug 25th 1864

Mr president

It is my Desire to be free. to go to see my people on the eastern shore. my mistress wont let me you will please let me know

if we are free. and what i can do. I write to you for advice. please send me word this week. or as soon as possible and oblidge.

Annie Davis

Belair Thorfad County MD.

Annie Davis was not free. The Emancipation Proclamation ordered the liberation only of slaves in the rebellious states, and Annie Davis lived in Maryland, a slave state that had remained loyal to the Union. The Republican platform for 1864, adopted in June, urged an "amendment to the Constitution . . . as shall terminate and forever prohibit the existence of slavery within the . . . jurisdiction of the United States." But it would be more than a year before the Thirteenth Amendment became law. For now, Annie Davis's letter remained unanswered and her hopes of freedom unfulfilled.



Mother of Black Soldier Asks for His Release

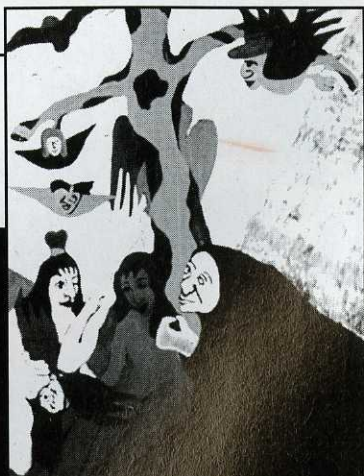
Carlisles [Pennsylvania] nov 21 1864

Mr abarham lincon

I wont to knw sir if you please wether I can have my son relest from the arme he is all the subport I have now his father is Dead and his brother that wase all the help that I had he has bean wonded twice he has not had nothing to send me yet now I am old and my head is blossaming for the grave and if you dou I hope the lord will bless you and me if you please answer as soon as you can if you please tha say that you will simpe-thise withe the poor thear wase a white jentel man told me to write to you Mrs jane Welcom if you please answer it to

he be long to the eight rigmat co a u st colard troops mart welcom is his name he is a sarjent

Lincoln's office sent Mrs. Welcom's plea on to the Bureau of Colored Troops. The surviving file includes a draft reply, dated December 2, 1864,



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Art from Bob Thompson

that indicates that the impoverished mother's plea was denied. The draft explained that "the interests of the service will not permit that your request be granted."



Black Soldier's Wife Needs Husband's Pay

Mt Holly [New Jersey],
July 11 1864

Abraham Lincoln
President

Sir,
my husband, who is in Co. K. 22nd Reg't U.S. Col'd Troops, (and now in the Macon Hospital at Portsmouth with a wound in his arm) has not received any pay since last May and then only thirteen dollars. I write to you because I have been told you would see to it. I have four children to support and I find this a great struggle. A hard life this!

I being a col'd woman do not get any State pay. Yet my husband is fighting for the country.

Very Resp'y yours
Rosanna Henson

Lincoln's staff forwarded this letter to the War Department, but there is no record in Mrs. Henson's file to indicate whether any action was taken.



Black Soldier Wishes Reunion With Enslaved Family

Taylors Barrecks [Louisville, Kentucky]
December 4th 1864

Mr Abrahm Lincoln
I have one recest to make to you that is I ask you to dis Charge me for I have a wife and she has four Children they have a hard master one that loves the South hangs with it he dos not giv tham a rage nor havnot for too yars I have found all he says let old Abe Give

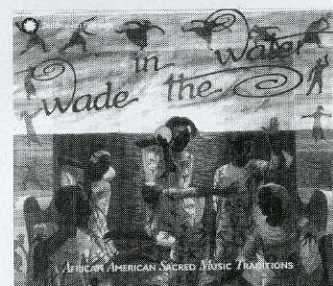
them Close if I had them I raise them up but I am here and if you will free me and hir and heir Children with me I Can take Cair of them She lives with David Sparks in Oldham Co Ky

... my name is George Washington heir in Taylors Barrecks and my famaly suffering I have sent forty dollars worth to them cence I have bin heir and that is all I have and I have not drawn any thing cence I have bin heir I am forty eight years my woman thirty three I ask this to your oner to a blige

yours &c

your un Grateful Servent
George Washington

Washington's letter pointed out the bitter irony facing black soldiers from the loyal border states. While they fought in the ranks, their families remained in slavery, unaffected by the Emancipation Proclamation. But like all such letters to Lincoln from non-whites, this one was merely forwarded to the Bureau of Colored Troops.



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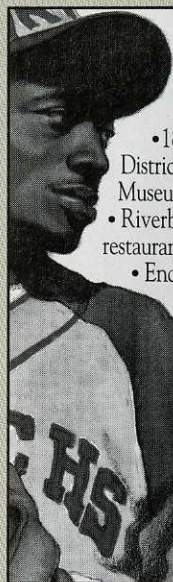
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**Is the Colored
Population to Suffer?**

Washington D.C.
Jny 22 1864

Mr Abraham Lincoln

Dr Sir

Some Reckon and others guess But what
I wish to know is this. what do you mean
to do with us Col[ore]d. population are
we to suffer and our enemies reap or can
we Reap now I was brought up a



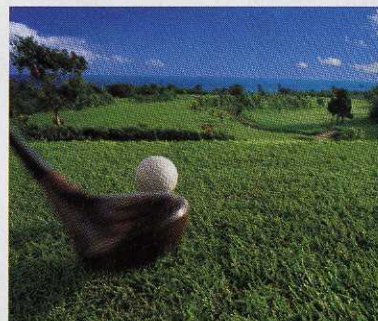
farmer and if I can have a hut in my
own native land and a little help that
will suffice me, then I have a family you
know well do the best you can and
oblige yr obt Servant

Ed. D. Jennings

*If Lincoln replied to this plea, his
response has never been found. But
Jennings' letter was, unusually,
retained in the President's own files. ★*

*This excerpt is from The Lincoln Mail-
bag: America Writes to the President,
1861-1865, edited by Harold Holzer,
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